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ABSTRACT

The Ontario (Canada) Ministry of Education and the Toronto (Ontario) Board of Education have suggested or mandated use of the teacher advisory structure for grades 7 through 9. The establishment of teacher advisory groups involves organizing teachers and students into small groups to permit instruction and advising to be personalized. Their function is to promote students' educational, personal, and social development. Advisory groups often function as vehicles for delivering a guidance-type curriculum to all students in a regular way. The educational agenda emphasizes program planning (secondary and postsecondary) and the social agenda emphasizes strengthening self-concept and peer group relationships and offering "survival assistance." Skills and characteristics of teacher-advisors are listed. Results of research studies on teacher advisory groups at the middle school and secondary school level are reviewed. The paper concludes that teacher advisory groups can increase student motivation and achievement and can connect adults and young people in ways that are genuinely educational and community enhancing. (Contains 14 references.) (JDD)

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TEACHER ADVISORY GROUPS: WHAT, WHY, HOW AND HOW SUCCESSFUL?

By Suzanne Ziegler

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TEACHER ADVISORY GROUPS: WHAT, WHY, HOW and HOW SUCCESSFUL?

Within the last academic year, both the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Toronto Board of Education have suggested or mandated the "teacher advisory" or" advisory/advisee" structure for Grades 7-9. The Board document "A Framework for Restructuring" states that "All schools will have developed by September,1993, an advocacy/mentorship program with the purpose of more closely 'bonding' students to the school." Senior public and secondary school advocacy/mentorship programs are to begin with a minimum of one pilot project per school.

What is the advisory group, why is it being recommended for these grade levels, how is it structured, and what evidence do we have for its success?

WHAT IS A TEACHER ADVISORY GROUP?

Advisory groups are organizations of teachers and students into small groups which permit instruction and advising to be personalized. Their function is to promote students' educational, personal, and social development.

The intention of the advisory group concept is to personalize the schooling experience for adolescents. By dint of its non- disciplinary nature (there is no subject curriculum), its size (generally smaller than a regular class), and its continuity over years, the advisory group is intended to give students the opportunity to know and be known by a teacher and a group of peers in a way that may not occur naturally in most classrooms, where contact is brief and the felt need to cover the curriculum may interfere with meeting more personal or more individual needs. To provide each student with a teacher who knows and cares about the student and is available as a mentor or advisor is the intention of these programs.

While many of the activities which occur during advisory group meeting time may be mechanical ones typical of homeroom periods (taking attendance, making announcements, orienting students to rules and programs), advisory groups also emphasize social and academic support activities which help students feel that someone is looking out for them in a personal way, considering their interests and needs. Advisory groups are often described as vehicles for delivering a guidance-type curriculum (including educational and career planning) to all students in a regular way, instead of making do with what guidance counsellors can deliver in a situation where each of them is responsible for hundreds of students. At the same time, it is clear that teacher-advisors are not guidance counsellors, and that the place of the guidance counsellor must be both maintained and expanded--especially in the roles of curriculum planner and consultant to teacher advisors-- to ensure effective advisory group programs.

Advisory programs have educational and social goals and content. The educational agenda of the advisory program emphasizes program planning (secondary and post-secondary); and the social agenda emphasizes strengthening self-concept and peer group relationships, and offering "survival assistance." Activities typically emphasize academic and career advisement, decision- making and problem-solving, and communication skills. These activities are typically supported by both resources (handbooks, units) and in-service training, often provided by the Guidance department within the

school and/or by a centralized guidance function. All of these activities are, ideally, informed by the teacher-advisor's ability to ask open-ended questions, clarify and summarize ideas, and link feelings and ideas.

In addition to acting as supportive, interested and concerned adults, teacher-advisors often act as the principal school-parent link, maintaining advisees' school records, liaising with their subject teachers, and communicating with home on a regular or as-needed basis.

A summary of key elements in a successful advisement program might include:

. a six-month to one-year planning period preceding implementation
. time for advisement scheduled on a regular, even daily, basis
. a maximum of 20-30 students per group, with an advantage for groups of 15 or fewer
. students remaining with same group/advisor till graduation
. advisors working, usually in teams, with the support and assistance of guidance counsellors
. counsellors coordinating an inservice program
. a teacher advisor handbook, including resource units to draw upon for activity planning
. parents and community who are aware of the value of the program and support it.

THE TEACHER-ADVISORS: WHO ARE THEY?

The advisor is a teacher who promotes and monitors individual students' educational and developmental experiences as they progress through school, and acts as both a coordinator/liaison with other teachers and with parents, and as an advocate for the students in her/his advisory group.

What attitudes and skills are required by the advisor role? One guide suggests that an advisor is someone who accepts the students for what they are, knows what the school has to offer, helps students match their needs with the school's offerings, and helps the school change to accommodate student needs. As well, the advisor is someone who really listens to students, and is skilled in facilitating open discussion.

Successful advisors are said to be characterized by their willingness to:

. see the student's point of view
. respond to students' feelings
. personalize the education experience
. facilitate a class discussion where students listen and share ideas
. develop a helping relationship with students and parents
. model interpersonal and communication skills

TEACHER-ADVISORY GROUPS AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

The movement to incorporate teacher-advisory groups into schools has a longer history in middle schools, or schools for young adolescents, than it has at the secondary level. In the United States, some advisory programs were instituted at the Grade 7-9 level as early as the 1920s, in response to an emphasis beginning early in the century on adolescence as a separate stage of development. Young adolescents were seen as being most urgently in need of programs responsive to their stage of personal and social development.

Although the group-advisory idea is nearly as old as the century, it is in the last three decades, with the movement toward middle schools, and most especially in the last decade, that the idea has become widespread. Along with an emphasis on a

smooth transition from elementary to secondary school; a smaller and more consistent peer group (fewer timetable changes per day); and more interdisciplinary teaching; the teacher-advisory group is one example of what educators see as more responsive practices to benefit the academic and social development of young adolescents. As well, the advisory group requires less restructuring or reorganization of the day at the middle school level, where it is more common for students to spend an extended period with one teacher, than is true in secondary schools.

Recent Research

Because teacher-advisories have been implemented longer at the grade 7-9 level in middle schools or junior high schools, there is more documentation of their implementation and its effects at that level than at the secondary level. A current review of educational practices for early adolescents (Braddock and McPartland, 1993) reviews studies which find that schools with strong adult advisory programs are more able to help students solve personal problems and connect to a caring environment at school. Students at schools with such programs report more frequent positive contact with teachers, and more positive perceptions of teachers' interest and support.

Descriptive case studies of six American middle schools with advisory programs include informally gathered evidence of success. (See James, 1986.) Program participants and evaluators point to higher school retention rates, a better school climate, increased staff-student contact, better student behaviour, better resources for subject teachers in the person of the advisor-coordinator who knows the student well, more and better parent-teacher contact, and a better use of guidance counsellors as consultants to advisors.

In a large-scale American survey of principals of schools which include grade 7, those in schools which implemented advisory groups expected fewer drop-outs than did principals in otherwise comparable schools. No actual tracking to test this belief was reported. (See MacIver and Epstein, 1991.)

Two recent Canadian reports of middle school implementation of the advisory group structure are encouraging in their findings. Both are based on perceptions (by teacher, students, and parents) rather than on "hard" evidence of change. The first is a school in British Columbia which implemented a teacher-advisory group program in 1986 (Espe, 1993). The school, called a "junior secondary" includes grades 8-10, and each advisory group is composed of 20 to 25 students from across the three grades. The group meets with its teacher-advisor daily, for an 18 minute period after lunch. The teacher-advisor contacts parents early in the year, and after each reporting period. Activities include administrative tasks (attendance, announcements, handing out report cards) as well as educational activities (study skills, journal writing), social activities (planning group events) and educational planning (next year's timetable). The advisors keep a file for each advisee, to remain current with each student's status and concerns. While they are not seen mainly as counselling periods, the advisory periods certainly do include group discussion, formal and informal, concerning timely topics in the news or within the school community, during which teacher-advisors serve as mediators, not experts. Because teacher-advisors need some counselling skills, professional development has been devoted to this activity.

Four years after the program was instituted, an independent evaluator surveyed staff, parents and students, and a comparison group of grade nine students at another school without the advisory

program. Results indicate that advisees do see their advisor as the adult they would go to for help, and that twice as many students in the school with the advisory program feel that someone is there for them compared to the other school. Nearly two-thirds of the parents felt that the teacher-advisor did look after their child, and as many felt that the program had eased the transition to secondary school. Most teacher-advisors said they talked to their advisees individually on a weekly basis, and the majority felt somewhat or quite successful at meeting the objectives of the program. The conclusion is that the teacher- advisories do provide a "front-line counselling service which allows guidance counsellors to spend their time on academic concerns and more serious counselling issues."

Research in a Toronto school

Closer to home, a Toronto school instituted a teacher-advisory program for its grade 6-8 students in 1990. Several in-service sessions were held to prepare teachers for the new role, and some resource materials were prepared in response to teachers' expressed need for some structured activities. One year after the program began, students, parents and teachers were surveyed on their response to the advisory groups; and the same surveys are being repeated again after a further two years. So far, the 1991 and 1993 data from the teachers are available.

A comparison of the teachers' responses in 1991 and 1993 illustrate a very substantial growth in support for the program. Whereas a minority (46%) of teachers in 1991 felt that they understood what was expected of them as advisors, by 1993 100% felt that way. Similarly, the percentage agreeing that staff members take responsibility as a team rose from 39% to 100%. Those who saw absences decrease in their class were 15% in 1991, and 78% in 1993. 90% now (compared to 69% in 1991) feel good about their work with their advisees; 90% like being an advisor; and 90% think the students are pleased with the program (compared to 46% in 1991). Finally, 100% feel that the project is successful so far, and that the prognosis for further progress and further advantage to students and staff is good.

TEACHER ADVISORY GROUPS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The success of the experiment to date at Fern School illustrates the need for time, in order for teachers (and students) to feel the full benefit of the advisory group. Most detailed accounts of the implementation of advisory programs indicate considerable teacher hesitancy and doubt about the value of the innovation. Studies done early on in the implementation of advisory programs rarely find anything like universal acceptance.

This is most true at the secondary level where, although advisory groups may be particularly important, in order to overcome the more complex and impersonal structure of the school, they are often most resisted by staff, who not infrequently view the advisory role as foreign to their traditional role as subject experts.

Thus, in a recent report from the North York Board, three secondary schools which implemented advisory programs in a pilot year reported a mixed reception by teachers. While two-thirds of the teacher advisors said they felt the groups were successful or very successful, more than a quarter were not pleased with the results. They ". . . pointed out that more professional development was necessary for staff advisors. . . . Overall, support for student-staff advisor programs as they currently exist was luke-warm. Although they seem to fulfil some needs related to student adjustment in

particular, the ultimate value seems not to have been achieved" (Shulman, 1992).

While the teacher advisory group is less common in secondary schools, and while it is clearly more complicated to implement, both structurally and psychologically, in school structures which depend more completely on subject specialist teachers, there are a number of documented examples of the practice in secondary schools.

Most of the documentation is at the level of implementation, not evaluation. Secondary schools which have been and are continuing to offer teacher-advisory programs, because they continue to be committed to what they feel to be a worthwhile support for their students, are described in some detail with regard to the rationale, organization, and content of their advisory programs. Such descriptions, from American high schools in many states, will be useful to high school administrators and teachers who are setting up advisory programs, and who can get an idea of the range of possible arrangements that schools can endeavour to implement. Examples include secondary schools in Oregon, Wisconsin, Maryland, and California (Klausmeir, 1983); in Utah (Utah, 1982); and in Colorado (Ozello & White, 1985). Details as to scheduling, content of sessions, training and on-going support, advisor-team structures, guidance department support, and other matters are all available in some detail. The Colorado document, for example, gives a "sample high school advisement calendar" which lists the major activities of the advisory groups month by month, from September through June.

Canadian examples of secondary level advisement programs are beginning to appear, but they typically report on programs which are still quite young. The North York paper, mentioned above, is one example. As well, research from Scarborough (Manning, Earl, and Jacka,1993) describes efforts in four pairs of middle and secondary schools, paired to improve transition activities and outcomes for students. Teacher advisory programs and expanded homeroom programs were included, but the level of implementation varied from site to site. The programs met with some resistance over the first two years.

Recent Research

Evaluative data on secondary school teacher-advisory programs is scarce. One example comes from a school in Florida, a state which has put particular emphasis and resources into the advisory group program, at first in middle schools, and more recently in secondary schools. (See Myrick and others, 1990.)

The Teacher Advisory Program (TAP) is operating in four secondary schools (and six middle schools) in Pasco County, Florida. The common foci of these programs are academic success, career exploration, decision-making, and interpersonal efficacy. The plan was first introduced at one of the high schools (Grades 9- 12) in 1984-85. Initially conceived as a program for high risk students, after one year it was extended to all students.About one quarter of the teachers had serious concerns about introducing the program, and others were less than supportive. They were apprehensive about a role for which they felt unprepared, and about the amount of time that would be required for advisement and record-keeping. At first, the groups met only bi-weekly, and that proved inadequate for maintaining bonding and continuity. Currently the minimal acceptable meeting time is weekly, for 35 minutes, as well as daily during the first two weeks of school. Individual advisement sessions occur at least once per semester, and usually once every six weeks. Parent contacts must occur at least once per semester. Advisees stay with their advisor and

Between 78% and 100% of teachers are involved per school, and the ratio of teachers to students is between 20:1 and 30:1. Seven curriculum modules are available to advisors.

Over time, teacher scepticism has decreased. Staff Development provided information and training, which made a big difference. As well, concrete improvements attributable to the program have encouraged staff to continue. Dramatic improvements in attendance occurred within the first quarter of implementation. Since then, the percentage of students entering colleges and universities has increased. As a result, advisors feel reinforced for their efforts, and more schools want to implement TAP.

What has made a difference? Key components would seem to be strong principal support, careful planning, high quality and frequent staff development opportunities--all elements very present in the Fern situation as well.

One other evaluation of changes in student attendance and performance following the introduction of an advisement program is available from a secondary school (Felner and others, 1982). In this case, however, the program was conceived as a transitional program for Grade 9s only, rather than the four- year, cross-age continuous program which is much more common in the literature. Students in the program were compared to students at another school which had no advisory program. At the end of the Grade 9 year, students in the experimental school had better attendance records and higher grade point averages than the comparison students. As well, they showed higher self-concepts, and they perceived their school environment as having greater clarity of expectations, better organizational structure, and higher levels of teacher support and involvement, than did the comparison group.

Findings like these suggest that the teacher advisory group can make a real difference for secondary as well as middle school students. The advisory group may help to create for secondary students something like a face-to-face community of learners--something which the size and structure of secondary schools as presently constituted makes very difficult, and something without which many students will never connect to school or to any learning environment. How teachers interact with students can make a difference in how well students learn. When students perceive that teachers care about and are interested in them personally, they are more likely to try hard, to be inspired, and to enjoy going to school.

CONCLUSION

A recent article reviewing research on effective organization of secondary schools (Lee and others, 1993) suggests that the "rational-bureaucratic" model of schooling has predominated in secondary school planning and organization until recently. This model stresses specialization of labour (teaching), and sees an advantage in large school size because of the opportunities for specialization and thus for offering a wide array of courses.

It is being suggested currently that educators consider a different model of schooling, the "personal-communal" model, which views schools as small societies, where adult roles are diffuse, division of labour is minimized, and relationships are personal, rather than impersonal, and social rather than only task-related. The advantages of the personal-communal model were emphasized decades ago by John Dewey, who felt that "much of present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life."

In fact, it is not only because of improvement in

students' attendance and achievement that teacher advisory programs are seen as important. They can be seen as important as an end in themselves, in that they can make connections between teachers and students and between students and students which are at the heart of any meaningful, non-alienating human experience. "The social interactions of schooling are not simply a mechanism for accomplishing some other aim, but rather **are** education itself. . . . In the distinctive workplace of a school, social relations among adults and students are much more than just a factor to be manipulated in the pursuit of academic production." (Lee et al, p.228)

From the rational-bureaucratic point of view, we cannot neglect strategies which increase student motivation and achievement. From the personal-communal point of view, we cannot neglect opportunities to connect adults and young people in ways which are genuinely educational and community-enhancing.

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